



Workplace Response to Anthrax Threat: OSHA Recommendations for Handling Mail

These guidelines address small mailroom operations (sorting, distributing, and handling). They can be distributed to all employees who may handle mail. Guidelines for large volume operations are found in OSHA's Anthrax Resource Fact Sheet.

Anthrax organisms can infect the skin, the gastrointestinal system, or the lungs. To cause infection, the anthrax spores must come into contact with broken or abraded skin, swallowed, or inhaled as a fine dust. However, anthrax infection can be prevented even after exposure to anthrax spores by early treatment with the appropriate antibiotics, see CDC Health Advisory. Anthrax spores can be dispersed in the air as a dust or can be carried on items such as mail or clothing. However, unlike the common cold or flu, anthrax infection itself is NOT spread from one person to another. These guidelines emphasize preventing the spread of anthrax spores through careful handling and isolation of suspicious packages and their contents.

General Mail Handling

- Be on the lookout for suspicious envelopes or packages, [see FBI Instructional Poster](#).
- Do NOT open suspicious mail.
- Open all non-suspicious mail with a letter opener or another method that minimizes skin contact with the mail and is least likely to disturb contents.
- Open mail with a minimum amount of movement.
- Do not blow into envelopes.
- Keep hands away from nose and mouth while opening mail.
- Turn off fans, portable heaters, and other equipment that may create air currents.
- Wash hands after handling mail.

Characteristics of Suspicious Packages and Letters

- Discoloration, oily stains, or an unusual odor.
- Crystals, powder, or powder-like residue on the surface.
- Suspicious or threatening language on the outside of package or letter.
- Postmark that does not match return address or no return address.
- Restrictive endorsements such as "Personal" or "Confidential".
- Distorted handwriting, block-printed or poorly typed addresses.
- Excessive tape or string.
- Rigid, uneven, irregular, or lopsided package.
- Package with soft spots, bulges, or excessive weight.
- Handwritten, block-printed or poorly typed addresses.
- Excessive postage.
- Title but no name or incorrect title.
- Misspelled addressee's name, title, or location.
- Misspelled common words.
- Addressee unknown or no longer with organization.
- Protruding wires or aluminum foil.
- Ticking sound.
- Unexpected mail from a foreign country.

If You Receive or Discover a Suspicious Package or Letter

- Do NOT open the package or letter.
- Do not shake, empty, or otherwise disturb its contents.

- Put the package down and do not handle it further.
- Do not touch or try to clean up the substance.
- Alert others nearby.
- Do not remove ANY items from area.
- Leave the area and gently close the door.

- After leaving the area:
 - Wash hands well with soap and water.
 - Contact your supervisor, designated responder,* or other appropriate authority.
 - Limit movements within the building to prevent spread of substance.

- Designated responders or other appropriate authority will determine the need for further action, which may include:
 - Directing further evacuation.
 - Reporting the incident to building security and notifying the appropriate authorities, such as the local police or federal authorities.
 - Perform additional decontamination activities as directed by the proper authorities.
 - Reporting the incident to facility managers so they can cut off electrical power and shut down ventilation systems serving the potentially contaminated areas.
 - Compiling a list of the names of all potentially affected individuals, including those who were in area when the suspicious mail was encountered.
 - Providing this list to the appropriate authorities.

*Employers should designate individuals who are trained to respond in the event that an employee receives a suspicious mailing. As a minimum, the designated responders should know how to contact facility managers, local emergency responders, and local law enforcement officials. Additionally, the designated responders should have authority to secure potentially contaminated areas or to direct other individuals to do so.